

By Chris Horgan August 30, 2011

*Executive director of the Lake Isabella-based Stewards of the Sequoia, the largest-on-the-ground volunteer organization in Sequoia National Forest working to protect access for all forms of recreation.*

How would you feel if your doctor conducted hundreds of thousands of dollars of testing and never reviewed the results? Instead, he left you bedridden for years when you could have been active and leading a normal life.

Well, that is pretty much what happened when more than 150 million acres of our public lands were studied 22 years ago by the U.S. Department of the Interior. Their individual local studies found that out of all those lands, 43 million acres were unsuitable for wilderness designation because they lacked wilderness qualities. They contained cabins, lookout towers, developed campgrounds, roads, cellphone towers, mines and even hazmat sites.

In the interim, pretty much all of the lands they found suitable for wilderness have been designated as such by Congress. Recently, Rep. Kevin McCarthy drafted HR 1581 in order for Congress to fulfill the promise made 22 years ago to release those lands found to be unsuitable in the costly studies paid for with our tax dollars.

His bill, the Wilderness and Roadless Area Release Act of 2011, would allow these lands to be returned to multiple uses. The public could rest assured there would be access for all forms of recreation and they could once again enjoy motorized recreation, mountain biking, hunting, fishing, camping as well as horse riding and hiking on these lands. Forest health would be promoted by allowing thinning of overgrown and diseased forests to provide vibrant habitat for wildlife and reduce the threat of wildfires.

This is one of those rare bills that is good for the environment, good for the public and good for the economy. HR 1581 is formally supported by virtually every local volunteer organization, recreation group, chambers of commerce and more than 85 organizations.

However, some people appear to be engaging in intentional fear-mongering by spreading misinformation about HR 1581. Recently, when I was in Washington, D.C., testifying before a House subcommittee about the need to release these unsuitable lands (you can view my testimony on <http://YouTube.com>; search for "HR 1581-Stewards of the Sequoia") I heard claims from a few naysayers like the Sierra Club and Wilderness Society citing things not even in the bill.

They claim HR 1581 would somehow cause these lands to be wholesale logged and mined, but that is not true. These lands would still be subject to the strictest environmental regulations in the world, such as clean air, water, erosion and habitat acts, as well as numerous local forest plan restrictions and public input, making large-scale logging and mining very unlikely.

They claim HR 1581 would release all 62 million acres of wilderness and roadless areas. Not true. The bill only releases the 43 million acres which have been found unsuitable for wilderness.

Some say releasing these lands would relinquish federal control to the state, which it does not. Under HR 1581, these lands would remain under the same federal management they have been under for more than 100 years.

Others want more local input about the management of these lands. They'd get it: These lands would be subject to local planning processes in each forest with full public involvement. Their fears are unfounded. Almost 80 percent of the Sequoia National Forest is already under wilderness, monument or other heavily restricted status. It is high time the remaining lands, where the majority of the public recreates, were released back to multiple uses.

HR 1581 is overdue. These public lands have languished in limbo for too long. Twenty-two years is a long time to fulfill a promise to the public.

Chris Horgan is the executive director of the Lake Isabella-based Stewards of the Sequoia, the largest-on-the-ground volunteer organization in Sequoia National Forest working to protect access for all forms of recreation.

